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Bush Lauds Man Tied to Contra Aid

Vice President Denies Coordinating Role in Secret Supply Efforts

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Vice President Bush yesterday described as "a patriot" a Cuban American identified as a leader of secret supply efforts to the Nicaraguan contras and said he has met the man three times.

On a campaign swing in South Carolina, Bush did not comment on reports that the Cuban American, Max Gomez, reported to Bush on his effort to supply the contras, or counterrevolutionaries, and that a Bush aide had helped make that effort possible. Bush's decision to avoid those reports followed a hurried strategy session among his aides yesterday morning.

The Los Angeles Times reported yesterday that Donald Gregg, Bush's national security assistant, had recommended Gomez to the chief of staff of El Salvador's air force, who later gave him a job. Eugene Hasenfus, the lone survivor of a crew of four on a C123 transport shot down over Nicaragua last Sunday, identified Gomez as a CIA employee who was running a covert supply effort to rebels inside Nicaragua from the Salvadoran base.

The Central Intelligence Agency flatly denies that Gomez is working for it, though he had a past association with the agency.

Bush yesterday avoided the points of the Los Angeles Times story and instead denied that he was directing or coordinating any operations in Central America. "To say I'm running the operation . . . it's absolutely untrue," Bush said. He also did not speak to the report that Gomez was involved in supplying Nicaraguan contras, instead de-

scribing his role as "to help the government of El Salvador put down . . . a Marxist-led revolution." Bush added: "That is the policy of the United States government to support that."

Bush referred to Gomez as "Felix Gomez" and said, "To my knowledge I met with him twice, shook hands with him a third time. He's a patriot." The meetings occurred in January 1985 and last May, Bush said, without elaboration.

Bush declined to take a Washington Post reporter on his trip to North and South Carolina yesterday. He spoke to local reporters in Charleston, S.C.

Bush's political advisers were described by informed sources as concerned that Gregg may have had a role in Central America that they did not know about. Gregg is described by colleagues as retaining close ties to his former employer, the CIA.

Reached yesterday by The Associated Press, Gregg said, "Neither the vice president nor I coordinated operations in Central America." He would not elaborate.

The allegation that Bush and a top aide were linked to the Nicaraguan rebel supply plane shot down last week is the latest indication that White House officials played a role in overseeing the secret war there after Congress cut off covert CIA aid two years ago.

Members of both the House and Senate intelligence committees, after being briefed by CIA officials, told reporters that they believed agency assertions that it had not sponsored the flight—just days before it would be back in business in Central America with \$100 million in new funding expected to be authorized next week, when Congress completes action on a giant spending bill.

CIA officials told the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Friday that Gomez had been "affiliated" with the agency's covert Air America flying service during the Vietnam war but had not been employed by the agency since then, one committee source said.

Today marks a week since the C123 went down in Nicaragua. Despite numerous, firm official statements about what the plane was not doing, the Reagan administration has not shared its knowledge about who was behind the supply effort.

"The question [about the sponsor of the flight] is why no one wants to come forward, if everything is innocent, and tell how they were going to help 'our heroes,' as they have been described," the intelligence committee source said. "You have to ask why the government is letting the CIA take the rap. Someone had to know, based on the complexity and sophistication of the operation."

The plane was one of several camouflage-painted cargo carriers based at one end of the Ilopango air field over the last several months. The Salvadoran government has denied any role in the contra supply mission, but several officials of private fund-raising groups said they have flown planeloads of aid into Ilopango for more than a year.

Several members of Congress, including Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.), chairman of the Senate intelligence panel, said they do not believe that administration officials have told the public all they know about the private financing and direction of the contra effort.

Several mentioned the possible role of staff members of the National Security Council. Until the Bush-Gregg allegations arose, most attention had been focused on Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, who has been reported as the administration's link to private fund-raisers since the ban on covert aid in 1984. Retired Army major general John K. Singlaub, one of the key contra fund-raisers, has acknowledged keeping North advised of his activities.

But the administration repulsed a congressional effort last year to find out more about North's role as a liaison to the contras. Rep. Michael D. Barnes (D-Md.), chairman of the House Foreign Affairs subcommittee on the region, said yesterday that requests for documents about North's activities were met by "a very thick stone wall." Barnes said he will hold a hearing Wednesday to probe the C123 crash.

Robert W. Owen, whose business card was found on the body of one of the two Americans killed in the C123 crash last week, has been cited by The Associated Press as a liaison between North and the contra leadership. The three top contra officials specifically asked that Owen get a contract to help administer the \$27 million in non-lethal aid Congress approved for the rebels last year.

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Another possible U.S. government link to the contra's air force at Ilopango is the purchase of a Maule "short takeoff and landing" plane that ended up in Central America. The plane was purchased in July 1984 by retired Air Force major general Richard Secord, who had been assistant deputy secretary of defense until his retirement in 1983; Robert Lilac, a former colleague of North on the NSC staff; and a third man.

Secord and Lilac couldn't be reached for comment, but Adolfo Calero, a top contra official, told the San Francisco Examiner in July that Secord had helped the contras get the plane.

The individuals whose names appear in stories about the private network of contra supporters often shared experiences in the CIA or the military during the Vietnam war. Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams said in a television interview yesterday that he wouldn't be surprised if former CIA employees were hired for the contra supply missions. "When you're put-

ting an operation like this together, you don't advertise in The New York Times," he said. "You ask around for people who are reliable."

Gregg and Gomez are thought to have known each other from the Vietnam era. Singlaub and Secord served there together conducting secret operations in Vietnam. And several other private contra fund-

raisers, including staff members of Soldier of Fortune magazine, also are Vietnam veterans.

Gregg, in addition to his Vietnam service with the CIA, was station chief in South Korea during the 1970s. During the Carter administration he was on the NSC staff.

Staff writer Joe Pickirallo contributed to this report.

How U.S. Law Limits Military Aid to the Contras

Several members of Congress suggested last week that efforts by U.S. officials and private groups to provide military aid to anti-government rebels in Nicaragua might violate U.S. law. Just what is the law?

Several laws might apply. One is an arms export control act that limits the export of military arms from this country. But the C123 shot down in Nicaragua last Sunday was carrying arms made by Soviet-bloc nations, so it is not clear that arms were exported from the United States in this case.

A second applicable law is a provision of the intelligence authorization act approved last year that precludes U.S. intelligence agencies from "participation in the planning or execution of military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua by the Nicaraguan democratic resistance" or "participation in logistics activities integral to such operations." But members of the congressional intelligence committees said last week they were persuaded that U.S. intelligence agencies were not involved directly in this episode.

Finally there are the neutrality laws, some of them dating back to the last century, that are sup-

posed to limit American citizens' intervention in foreign countries. One provision, formally known as 18 USC 960, says:

"Whoever, within the United States, knowingly begins or sets on foot or provides or prepares a means for or furnishes the money for, or takes part in, any military or naval expedition or enterprise to be carried on from thence against the territory or dominion of any foreign prince or state, or of any colony, district, or people with whom the United States is at peace, shall be fined not more than \$3,000 or imprisoned not more than three years, or both."

According to a legal memorandum prepared by the Library of Congress for Senate Democrats, that law, as interpreted in court cases, makes it illegal for an American to provide money, arms or transport to a military expedition or enterprise directed against a foreign power with which the United States is at peace. The Reagan administration, like some of its predecessors, disputes that sweeping interpretation, asserting the war being waged by the contras, or counterrevolutionaries, was not planned in this country but by Nicaraguans abroad.